

The First Cowboys

You probably have seen many cowboys – in pictures or in real life. It is easy to recognize cowboys, even when they're not riding horses. You'll know them by their high leather boots and big ten-gallon hats. Do you know where that name comes from? The hat is so large that people said it could hold 10 gallons of water.

Cowboys must do many different jobs. Perhaps a cowboy's most important jobs are herding cattle and protecting them from wild animals and cattle robbers. This often means working from morning to sundown in cold or rainy weather. Therefore, it is not surprising that cowboys must have strength, endurance, and courage.

Maybe that is why the cowboy has come to represent values that many Americans admire. Two of these values are working hard and being independent. In fact, to many people the cowboy represents, or is a symbol of, honor. After all, just look at how many movies have cowboys as heroes.

Many of those movies show cowboys fighting with Native American Indians in the Old West. But did you know that the first cowboys were actually Native American Indians? You may find this hard to believe, but it's true.

Spanish explorers settled in Mexico in the early 1500s. They brought with them sheep, cattle, and horses – animals that had never been seen in North America before.

The Spanish settlers built huge ranches where they kept their cattle. Some of the ranches had as many as 150,000 cattle. Who would take care of all these cattle? The settlers did not want to do all the work themselves. So they trained many Mexican Indians to work on the cattle ranches.

The Mexican cattle workers became known as *vaqueros* from the Spanish word *vaca*, which means "cow."

The *vaqueros* were the first cowboys. They quickly learned how to ride horses. Soon they were among the best riders in the world. They were proud horsemen. It was said that a *vaquero* would never walk if he could ride. In fact, a true *vaquero* took pride in being *bowlegged*. This means having legs that were curved from many hours of riding a horse.

Vaqueros had to know much more than just how to ride a horse. A *vaquero* also had to be an expert with a long rope, which in Spanish is called a *reata*. Some *reatas* were 100 feet long. *Vaqueros* used the ropes to catch and tie up cattle. A skilled

vaquero could catch a running animal that was nearly 75 feet away. One time, a *vaquero* even used his *reata* to catch a low-flying eagle.

A *vaquero* lived a very hard life. His house was just a small wooden hut or shack. His bed was a straw mat on the ground. For meals, he usually ate simple corn tortillas. A *vaquero's* shirt and pants were made of plain cotton.

Vaqueros wore big, wide hats to protect



Leather cowboy boots

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5

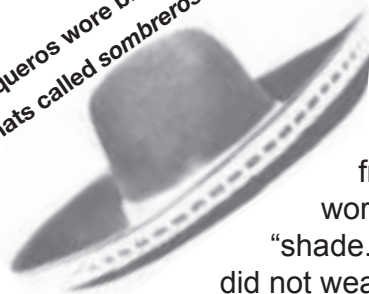
LA.A.2.2.8 Reference Form A



These photographs of a cowboy in the 1800s (left) and a modern Texas cowboy (right) show that not much has changed in cowboy attire.



Vaqueros wore big, wide hats called sombreros.



themselves from the sun, wind, and rain.

These hats are called *sombreros*, which comes

from the Spanish word *sombra*, meaning

“shade.” The first vaqueros did not wear leather boots. In

fact, the very first vaqueros did not wear shoes at all.

In 1848, following the war between the United States and Mexico, the United States gained a very large piece of Mexico’s land. This territory later became California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of some other western states.

The vaqueros had been working with cattle on the land for nearly 300 years. Now they showed the new American settlers how to be cowboys. They taught the Americans how to rope cattle. They showed them how to keep the cattle together in large herds and how to drive them great distances.

The new American cowboys learned many things from the vaqueros. The Americans got something else too – many new words for their language. For example, another word for cowboy is *buckaroo*. Do you know where that word comes from? Instead of saying “vah KER

oh,” Americans said “bak HAR oh.” After many years, the word became *buckaroo*. A cowboy’s rope is called a *lariat*. That comes from *la reata*, meaning “the rope.”

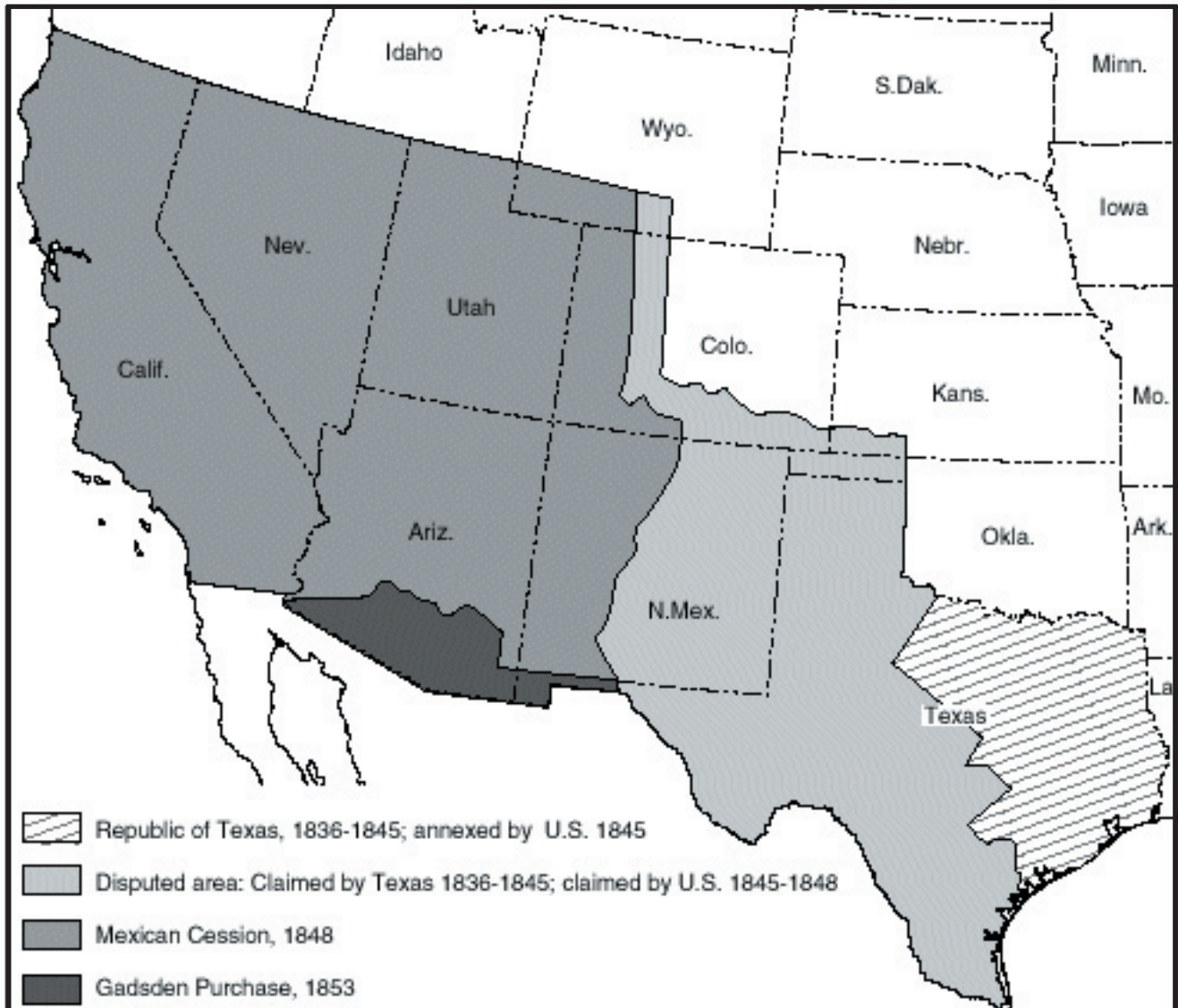
To this day, many of the cowboys of the American West are Mexican-American. They are the proud descendants of the Mexican vaqueros—the Mexican Indians who were the first cowboys.



In the 1800s, reatas (also known as lariats) were commonly made of horsehair or rawhide. At one end of the reata is a running knot by which a loop or noose is made. The loop is thrown, from as far away as 30 ft., around the horns or feet of an animal and drawn tight. To use a reata on horseback requires great skill of the rider and his horse—the pull of the captured animal may throw the rider’s horse, or the horse or rider may become entangled in the rope.

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5
L.A.A.2.2.8 Reference Form A

1850s MAP OF THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES



The Mexican-American War from 1846-1848 was fought over Texas joining the United States (the *annexation* of Texas). Mexico refused to recognize that Texas had *seceded* (withdrawn from being part of Mexico), so Mexico fought to get Texas back from the United States.

The most important result of the war was the Mexican Cession in which several additional Mexican territories became part of the United States.

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5
LA.A.2.2.8 Reference Form A

Name _____ **Date** _____

Directions: Read the passage “The First Cowboys,” then circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Based on the map, the Mexican Cession included only part of the state of
 - A. Nevada.
 - B. Colorado.
 - C. Utah.
 - D. Texas.

2. Based on the map, the Mexican Cession occurred BEFORE
 - A. the Mexican-American War.
 - B. the Gadsden Purchase.
 - C. Texas was annexed by the U. S.
 - D. the dispute over Texas.

3. Using a reata while on horseback requires a vaquero to be skilled because
 - A. vaqueros spend many long hours riding their horses.
 - B. a vaquero must throw his reata at least 75 feet to catch a running animal.
 - C. his horse could get tangled in his rope when he catches an animal.
 - D. skilled vaqueros on horseback are often able to catch low-flying eagles.

4. The “1850s Map of the Southwestern United States” was included
 - A. to show the status of the areas in the southwestern United States at that time.
 - B. to display the boundaries of the current southwestern states.
 - C. to identify the states now located in the southwestern United States.
 - D. to point out the areas claimed by foreign countries in the 1850s.

5. Based on the article and the map, the most important result of the war between Mexico and the United States was
 - A. new words were added to the American language.
 - B. Mexican vaqueros taught American settlers how to be cowboys.
 - C. additional Mexican land became part of the United States.
 - D. Texas decided to secede from Mexico.

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5
LA.A.2.2.8 Reference Form A

ANSWER KEY – The First Cowboys – LA.A.2.2.8

LA.A.2.2.8: The student identifies meanings through the process of selecting and/or organizing information from a single text or across texts. This process may involve application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation appropriate to fifth grade.

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